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SUBJECT: SENATE PRESIDENT GEOANA RESIGNS FROM NATIONAL DEFENSE
COUNCIL

1. (SBU) Mircea Geoana, the president of the Social-Democratic Party (PSD) and President of the Senate, announced on June 7 (the day of the European Parliamentary elections) he was resigning his position as vice-chair of the National Defense Council (CSAT). In explaining his decision, Geoana accused President Basescu of "abusing the symbol of the military, the sacrifice and devotion of Romanian soldiers for electoral purposes" in connection with Basescu's visits to Romanian troops in Iraq and Afghanistan on June 4 and 6, respectively. The visits came just before the official closing of the electoral campaign and one day before the vote. Geoana characterized the visits as evidence of politicizing the military. Furthermore, Geoana criticized the President for unilaterally announcing the withdrawal of Romanian troops from Iraq without (Geoana alleged) properly informing the CSAT and the Parliament. In an open letter to the President, Geoana postured that this behavior was not compatible with a democratic state, and by stepping down from the CSAT, he grandly claimed to be emphatically turning his back on "domestic and international actions by which President Basescu brings political benefits to his party."

BASESCU WELCOMES GEOANA'S DECISION

2. (SBU) President Basescu staged a special press conference on June 9 to respond to Geoana's accusations. He welcomed Geoana's decision to give up his CSAT membership, contrasting it with Geoana's insistence six months ago to have the law changed to allow the Senate President to be a CSAT member. Basescu also recalled previous Geoana positions, including his opposition to the recently-concluded IMF deal and his 2006 call for a precipitous pullout of Romanian troops from Iraq. Basescu reminded Geoana that he participated in the parliamentary decision to extend the presence of the troops in Iraq last December and the subsequent CSAT decision in January. Basescu underscored that the Memorandum between Romania and Iraq clearly provided that Romanian troops would leave Iraq before July 31, 2009 and that the Memorandum was adopted by the full Parliament on May 12, 2009. Basescu explained that the day of his visit to Iraq (June 4) had been decided long before by the generals of the Multi National Force and had no relationship to the electoral campaign. At the same time, Basescu invoked a tradition of combined visits to the two operations theaters where Romanian troops are active, and noted it would have been "impolite" not to travel to Afghanistan as well. President Basescu then expressed his pleasure that the complex mission that started in 2003 was successfully completed six years later and that Romania resisted previous internal pressures to pull out from Iraq earlier.

PRESIDENTIAL POSTURING FOR MR. GEOANA

3. (SBU) During the formation of the new government in December 2008, Geoana wanted to shadow Basescu and to have an increased role in foreign affairs and national security issues. Given his clear ambitions to become president himself, Geoana refused to assume any governmental portfolio in the new PSD-PDL coalition. Instead he chose to become the constitutional "number two" in the Romanian state, i.e. President of the Senate, who is next in line to replace the incumbent President if the latter is unable to fulfill his duties. The office provides a good platform for a presidential candidate.

4. (SBU) Geoana coveted some presidential prerogatives right away. During the negotiations for a new governing coalition, he successfully convinced his coalition partners from the PDL to support allowing the Senate President to become the second

vice-chair of CSAT. (Note: The President of Romania is the CSAT chair and the Prime Minister is its vice-chair). Therefore, one of the first decisions of the PDL-PSD government was to amend the CSAT law to make this membership change through an "Emergency Ordinance" (EO 224 of December 30, 2008).

¶5. (SBU) Because EOs enter into force immediately, Geoana could in his new capacity attend the four CSAT meetings scheduled in the first part of 2009. At the same time, the EO was sent to the Parliament where both chambers eventually endorsed it on May 4. However, final approval and signing of EO 224 into law by the President is pending a decision of the Constitutional Court, which is weighing a challenge from a group of opposition National Liberal Party (PNL) legislators to the measure's constitutionality. The main argument of the PNL legislators is that the EO and the law adopting it breach the principle of the separation of powers, since the CSAT is part of the Executive Branch, which only reports to the Parliament on a yearly basis. The Parliament should not, in their view, have a representative on the National Defense Council.

¶6. (SBU) Comment: The presidential election campaign will only pick up momentum from here. Meanwhile, the Constitutional Court is expected in the coming days to rule on the PNL's challenge to Geoana's position in the CSAT. Insiders told PolOffs that the Court seems likely to accept the PNL's argument that it is unconstitutional. To be forced out by a court ruling would be a serious blow for Geoana and would cast his earlier persistence in getting on the CSAT in a bad light. It is therefore understandable that Geoana, to save face, is pre-empting that scenario by inventing a Basescu-related excuse for leaving the Council before the Constitutional Court announces its decision. Geoana's credibility is at stake, which explains his pretext and excellent timing (Election Day) to announce his unilateral decision to give up his CSAT membership. He may even hope that he can benefit politically if he succeeds in linking his decision to the alleged mishandling of the CSAT by President Basescu.

¶7. (SBU) Comment continued: At the same time, Geoana wants to present himself as a serious challenger to President Basescu and as a much more responsible would-be president. We have been told by PSD contacts that Geoana was advised for his own electoral benefit not to miss any opportunity to attack Basescu and to help his party distance itself from Basescu's PDL (a tough act when the two parties share the governing coalition). Over the last few months, Geoana has not been shy in challenging Basescu on major strategic issues, such as political reform, the IMF deal, and the relationships with Russia and Moldova, as well as on procurement of multi-role fighter planes and on the best timing for the pullout of troops from Iraq. Knowing that many of these issues involve important equities for the U.S., PSD contacts privately assure us that Geoana is not serious on many of them (such as his comments against the procurement of a replacement for Romania's aging MiG-21 fleet), but that this is all just part of his pre-electoral campaign posturing. In relations with the United States, as with internal coalition politics, it would appear Geoana is trying to have it both ways. End comment.

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